



International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

**Remarks to Delegates
at the Mexico City International Meeting on
Social Participation in the Management of Urban Environments**

by

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Nov.18, 1998

IDRC is delighted to co-sponsor this important and timely event with the Government of Mexico City. But we come here deeply concerned about the devastation wrought upon Central America by Hurricane Mitch. We assemble *here* in a spirit of solidarity with our neighbours *there*.

In these countries, peoples' immediate needs can be addressed only through a generous outpouring of emergency assistance. That is crucial in the short term. IDRC - my institution - has a specific mandate to support research which will lead to solutions in the long-term. But we recognize that for those affected by this disaster, there is an urgent need for small, quick-reaction tools. To that end, IDRC is devoting the equivalent of close to \$250,000 U.S. to support short-term studies to address Central America's current situation.

Turning now to today's subject of discussion, examining ways in which citizens and governments can work together to improve the environmental management of large cities is of vital concern to each and every one of us - no matter where we live.

Fostering and managing healthy cities represents an immense challenge. But involving citizens in this process is one of the most essential - and difficult - ones to tackle.

This is because citizen participation is part of a much larger whole. And the parts with which it interlocks are also essential - and equally difficult; namely, environmental management and good governance. These are issues that directly affect many of you in this room and you, more than anyone, understand their complexities from first-hand experience.

Without doubt, we know how pressing these issues are. We know that urban growth is outstripping rural growth by three-to-one, so that within the decade, half of the world's people will live in cities. And we know that these population pressures will only serve to exacerbate the environmental problems that currently besiege large cities.

For many cities, such growth heightens the risk of environmental health crises. Because urban waste production is growing even faster than urban populations, by the year 2025, urban waste production will quadruple.

Put simply; time is not on our side.

But the news is not all bad. There are beacons of hope - everywhere - not the least of which is the fact that we are here today grappling with this issue. We in Canada don't face these problems to the same degree as many of you, but we face them nonetheless.

The only way to do the job, then, is with imagination and innovation.

There are other beacons of hope. Today, many recognize that, if social and economic progress is to be made, then governance must be improved. The government of Mexico City is part of a much larger, continental movement that is making an effort to do precisely that. The relationship between democracy, good governance, and development is, to me, obvious. Development walks hand-in-hand with democracy.

As Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, put it:

“Good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development. By good governance is meant creating well-functioning and accountable institutions - political, judicial, and administrative - that citizens regard as legitimate, through which they participate in decisions that affect their lives, and by which they are empowered.”

We at IDRC are particularly aware of the link between the poverty, democracy and the environment. Where poverty is pervasive, the involvement of the poor in managing their environment is absolutely key.

Mr. Cardenas has often made the point that knowledge needs to be shared - a position we heartily support. At IDRC, we support research which encourages local solutions to local problems, using local strategies and technologies.

Today, this research is carried out in situations in which the roles of the state, the private sector, and NGOs are in varying stages of flux. Our global village connects us so intimately that not only do the problems in one region have an impact in quite separate, disparate regions - but so do the solutions.

Some programs we support in Latin America illustrate this well - **The Environmental Management Secretariat, Cities Feeding People and Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health.**

The **Environmental Management Secretariat** works with cities to support their demand for research. Cities define what they need, and together we share the cost of support for the research. By agreement, whatever information is gathered will be made public. This Secretariat provides the cities with opportunities to enter into partnerships to tackle complex environmental concerns.

Let me give you an example of one, highly productive, partnership arrangement. Three municipalities in Porto Alegre, Brazil, found themselves in a difficult situation with water. They each had problems with water pollution and water shortages.

So the three municipalities entered into a partnership with IDRC to research how to deal with the situation. As a result of the research, they devised a joint management program. Now they are in the process of building a new institution, coordinated by the municipalities, to manage their urban water shed.

This solution is independent of particular governments - meaning that governments may come and go, but their joint management solution will not. This example suggests that solutions which include civil society put into motion a different set of mechanisms from those that come from government alone. The new institutions which result hopefully will have the strength that comes from stability, but a stability built on legitimacy.

IDRC is working in collaboration with the UNDP as represented here by Mr. Peter Grohmann of

the Public-Private Partnership Program, and with Mr. Jorge Price of the Urban Management Program of Habitat. Through the Environmental Management Secretariat, small grants will be provided to municipalities to examine alternative models for engaging with the private sector and other elements of civil society. The primary focus will be on urban water and waste management. Participants will be informed of the details by the Environmental Management Secretariat.

Cities Feeding People is, as the name implies, a research program involving urban agriculture. I found it interesting - given our location - to learn that the urban approach to cultivation can be traced as far back as the Aztecs. The Aztecs knew there were benefits to be had from making good use of existing and accessible space.

Cities Feeding People supports research that examines the political and technical solutions needed to make urban ecosystems sustainable, and to improve the well-being and health of those city dwellers who are low-income food producers and consumers.

Among other things, we have supported research into organic solid and liquid waste reuse. Not only does this research tackle environmental health concerns, but it implicitly addresses one of the most serious situations facing cities in the future - water.

Mr. Cardenas recently said that water is one of the biggest environmental challenges facing humans as we approach the 21st century. Certainly, the fact that water consumption in Mexico City is 25% higher than the rate of replacement is cause for grave concern.

And, as urban agriculture inevitably raises governance issues, IDRC has also supported research into land tenure. We have learned that the participatory approach works. Argentina, for example, has devised a communal gardening system in which the government allows producers to seed public lands under negotiated, mutually-beneficial conditions.

In Cuba, municipalities allow farmers to use land in exchange for a long-term commitment to care for the crops and *not* to erect structures. And in Tacna, Peru, farmers are allowed to use treated wastewater in return for maintaining public green areas.

These schemes are only possible because the governments involved aren't afraid of tackling tough problems. They're open to innovative ways of addressing them - through collaboration and consultation.

Another IDRC initiative, **Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health**, explores how better management of the ecosystem can lead to improved human health and well-being.

It's clear that rapid and increasing demands for clean air and water, safe housing, health and educational facilities, employment, food, energy, and waste disposal could overwhelm cities - something that, in many places, has already happened.

And I know an ecosystems approach is not new for many of you. The government of Mexico City, for example, recognizes that the way to deal with health problems is through better

management of the ecosystem - that store-bought medications cannot address environmental health issues in the long-term.

It's interesting to note that while the city has been studied extensively, little research has been carried out on an ecosystemic approach to human health, an idea which originally emerged from the world of Canadian researchers.

IDRC's Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health Program specifically supports research to identify better management of ecosystems interventions in order to improve human health and well-being. At the same time, we're interested in understanding how to maintain, or improve, the health of the ecosystem as a whole. IDRC is currently supporting research on ecosystems facing stresses in three areas of human activity - mining, large-scale agriculture, and urbanization.

The need for this research is great given that, by the year 2000, 23 cities in the world will have populations of at least 20 million people - and 18 of those cities will be in developing countries. This population crisis will place unprecedented stresses on the institutional, infra-structural, and natural resources of cities.

What's required are solutions that are not expensive, that don't depend on elaborate infrastructure - that depend, instead, on people changing their behavioural patterns.

It's exciting that, over the next two days we're jointly sponsoring a project-development workshop with the City of Mexico to explore "An Ecosystem Health Approach to Air Pollution in Mexico City." This is a concrete way for Mexican researchers and our people, to work together to find better, more effective, more participatory responses to environmental management and health policies.

All of this is by way of underlining the point I made at the beginning - we're in this together. The problems facing cities affect us all. IDRC's role is to act as a vehicle through which groups themselves identify their concerns and, through participating in the research, devise solutions to them.

Research conducted at the international level is a way for people to exchange experiences and strategies with their counterparts in other countries, to foster solidarity among themselves, and develop a momentum for being included in the political processes of their country. Governments that support this participatory - profoundly democratic - process have much to gain. The seemingly monumental problems of environmental degradation, poverty, unemployment, and inequity can be addressed if citizens, local and municipal governments, people like you, and centres like IDRC, work together.

But the reality is that involving people in environmental management, in caring for our ecosystem, is tough. It demands that we change - that we change the way in which government works, and in how managers manage.

There's a saying I think is quite apt in this context. *If you don't take change by the hand, it will take you by the neck.*

Fostering healthy cities does involve good environmental management and good governance. But it also means being open to change, *embracing* change. And if we were to be really honest, perhaps that is hardest of all.

I'd like to conclude with the words of one of Mexico's leading men of letters, Carlos Fuentes.

Some time ago, Mr. Fuentes delivered an important lecture in Canada. Mr. Fuentes chose to entitle his lecture "*Latin America: At War with the Past.*" His sentiments are just as relevant today, and to this issue, as when he spoke to Canadians. And they're particularly important as we meet in this place which is truly a testament to the rich history of Mexico. He said:

"Remember the future.

Imagine the past.

See the present and deal with it. It is a part of history.

Tomorrow it shall be the past, but so will tomorrow itself, today's future.

Let us respect the times of mankind, not exacerbate and sacrifice them."